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The Road to Nowhere

Koans and the Deconstruction of the Zen Saga

by

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Abstract

The grand saga of Zen promotes its tradition as an unbroken 'mind-to-mind transmission outside words and letters'. This ideal harbours two problems for contemporary Zen. On one hand the convention of continuity glosses over disjunctions in the history and prevents a critical view of the roots of contemporary Zen practice. On the other hand the disdain for 'words and letters' stifles critical thought and academic study. In the last few decades Zen scholars have deconstructed the grand saga. This study investigates the effect that such deconstruction might have on contemporary Zen. Koan stories play a pivotal role in supporting the grand saga. They illustrate and uphold a spiritual genealogy which purports to trace each master right back to Śakyamuni Buddha. Thus deconstruction threatens spiritual authority. This study examines current research into the history of koans and indicates how its results might shape a new understanding of the history of Zen. Modern scholarship endeavours to deconstruct not only the history but also the practice of Zen, in particular the practice of koan study. Lineages that are rooted in the Rinzai tradition maintain that koans have the power to transform those who hold them in sustained awareness. A key question is whether koans can trigger realisation experiences, or whether this is a recent myth engendered by the West's emphasis on spiritual experience. In response, the latter part of this study investigates how koans are used and experienced in the Diamond Sangha as an example of a contemporary Zen lineage. Experiences by its students indicate that koans can indeed catalyse realisation experiences and have the power to transform lives. This suggests that an ongoing dialogue between practitioners and scholars would be of benefit to both factions. Only a critical evaluation of its history and practice will enable Western Zen to finally develop its own authentic practice.

The Road to Nowhere
Koans and the Deconstruction of the Zen Saga

1. Introduction

To look into the chasm between the master narrative[1] of Zen on one side, and historical evidence on the other, is to invite vertigo. In the great saga of Zen, Bodhidharma stared at a wall for nine years, Huike's severed arm reddened virgin snow, Nanquan clutched a frantic cat in one hand and a knife in the other, and Linji clobbered and roared.

None of which ever happened, according to historians.

Imagine Zen without its legends. Not much would be left of Zen[2] as we know it. This is because the legends of Zen are not just illustrations or embellishments; they encapsulate the tradition. Zen stories invite and embody a radical shift of consciousness and are a powerful medium of communication. Zen legends are expressions of fundamental Buddhist teachings. However, contemporary Zen still tends to promote legend as historical fact.

In the last few decades, scholarly research has deconstructed the great saga of Zen. In the following study I investigate the effects that a deconstruction of the master narrative might have on contemporary Zen.

The master narrative, that is, the shared understanding by the Zen community of its history and practice, is upheld by masters of each generation, and is illustrated mainly by koan[3] stories. The grand saga promotes Zen as an unbroken 'mind-to-mind transmission outside words and letters'. This dictum holds two implications. The first one is that there is a perfect continuity in the history of Zen without any disjunctions. However, in reality Zen as we know it today is the sum total of changes by successive cultures and eras. With each change, the master narrative is reconfigured to accommodate and justify the current break with tradition. The second implication is that 'words and letters', i.e., ideas and writings, are disdained. It follows that the master narrative has the effect of stifling critical thought and intellectual study.

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[1] Robert Sharf coined the term 'master narrative' in respect of early Buddhism in China (Sharf, 2002: 7). I have appropriated it here.

[2] The anglicized term 'Zen' is used in this paper as a general term except when specifically referring to Chinese Chan or Japanese Zen.

[3] In the following I use the English word 'koan' as referring generally to the term called *gong'an* (Chinese), *kongan* (Korean), or *kōan* (Japanese).

Koan stories illustrate a spiritual genealogy in which each present-day master can seemingly trace his or her 'family' line back to Śhakyamuni Buddha—just like each living branch can be traced back to its roots. A good portion of spiritual authority rests upon such assertions of unbroken transmission. When the master narrative is deconstructed it puts into doubt such claims, and spiritual authority is threatened. In chapter 2 I discuss the master narrative and the implications of its deconstruction. In particular, I point out that only a critical evaluation of the master narrative will enable contemporary Zen to find authentic Western forms of practice.

Koan stories are the mainstay of the pseudohistory that Zen teachers traditionally promote. In order to change the uncritical acceptance of Zen lore as historic fact, it is important to know about the state of current research. I plot the genesis of koans according to scholarly research in chapter 3. The vivid interchanges in the great koan collections of the Song (960-1279) read like eye-witness accounts of sayings and actions by masters in the Tang (618-907). But did these interchanges really happen? Some scholars maintain that all koan stories were fabricated in the Song; others see evidence of lively encounter dialogues[4] in the Tang. I track this dispute and examine relevant evidence.

Modern scholarship endeavours to deconstruct not only the history but also the practice of Zen, in particular the practice of koan study. Lineages that are rooted in the Rinzai tradition maintain that koans have the power to transform those who hold them in sustained awareness. A key question is whether koans can trigger realisation experiences, or whether this is a recent myth engendered by the West's emphasis on spiritual experience. Robert Sharf, for example, holds that the notion that koans induce a non-conceptual experience can be traced back only to Japanese intellectuals, such as D.T. Suzuki, and has no basis in fact.

In response to Sharf's assertion, I consider what koans are and how they work. Why are koans so strange? Can they really bring people to enlightenment? I pursue these questions in chapter 4 and investigate how koans are used and experienced in the Diamond Sangha as an example of a contemporary Zen lineage.

Whilst a comprehensive study of realisation as an experience of Zen is outside the scope of this dissertation, the personal comments quoted[5] indicate that Sharf's assumptions may be flawed. A conclusion is that an ongoing dialogue between practitioners and scholars would be of benefit to both sides. Only a critical evaluation of its history and traditions will enable Western Zen to finally develop its own authentic practice.

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[4] 'Encounter dialogue' is a term used by John McRae to render Yanagida Seizan's term *qiyuan wenda* (McRae, 2003: 77-78).

[5] Some of the personal accounts quoted in this chapter are answers in response to personal interviews with students in the Diamond Sangha lineage in November 2006. I quote them in the following as IG (Interview Group). The Diamond Sangha, a lay Zen Buddhist organization, was founded in 1959 by Robert Aitken, a Dharma Heir of Yamada Roshi. Starting out in Hawaii, it now has affiliations in the USA, Europe, South America, and Australasia.

2. The master narrative of Zen

2.1. What is the master narrative?

The master narrative is based upon the ideal of Zen as 'mind-to-mind transmission outside words and letters'. Thus the focus of Zen's self-narrative is on the continuity of the tradition and it glosses over its disjunctions. In actual fact the history of Zen shows a series of major and minor disjunctions. Major disjunctions mark the turning points when the tradition was carried into a new culture. We can point to the emergence of Zen in Japan, and the entry of Zen into the West as such major disjunctions. Minor disjunctions are schisms that happened within lineages.

After each disjunction a new branch emerges and reconfigures the master narrative to show that it holds and expresses the 'real' tradition. Thus Japanese Zen upholds that Chinese Chan failed to develop after the Song dynasty—i.e. immediately after Zen came to Japan—and that Japanese Zen is the true essence not only of the Chan tradition, but of Buddhism as a whole. This fundamentalist attitude has been accepted uncritically by Western practitioners.

The gap between the master narrative of Zen and its known history has widened in the last decades. Although scholarly research has unmasked numerous Zen legends as fiction, many Zen practitioners still cling to the traditional narrative. Here is an example. Zen Master John Daido Loori says the following:

> A direct insight into the teachings was said to be carried for twenty-eight generations in India. Then it was brought to China by Bodhidharma. It flowered there in the Tang Dynasty and continued for fifty-one more generations in China and Japan. (2006: 5)

Loori follows along the well-worn lines of the grand saga, presenting a Sunday-school image of Zen.[6] Whilst he flags the story of Buddhism in India as legendary, the master narrative from Bodhidharma onwards is portrayed as actual history.

Zen lore is pervasive and persuasive. One reason for this is that Zen stories read like eye-witness accounts. McRae warns of mistaking art for reality:

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[6] McRae: 'To tell any version of Bodhidharma's hagiography is to present a Sunday-school image of Zen' (2002: 27).

> It is important to recognize that the vivid immediacy of Chan literature, the feeling of "being there", is a literary effect contrived through literally centuries of combined effort. (McRae, 2003: 100)

This might explain why a Zen student could confuse legend with historical event, but it does not clarify why most masters still present legend dressed as history. There are two questions to consider here. The first question is why there is a lack of interest in historicity amongst contemporary Zen teachers. On one hand this apathy may be a result of Zen's disdain for scholarly research. On the other hand it may be that teachers are reluctant to weaken the spiritual *mana* of the great Zen stories by examining whether they have a historical basis or not, because they are treasured pathways of conveying Buddhist teachings.

The other question is whether historicity threatens spiritual authority. It may be that teachers cling to the master narrative because one of its functions is to authenticate spiritual genealogy. Koan stories claim to trace Zen lineages right back to their 'grand ancestor' Śakyamuni Buddha (Welter, 2004: 138) and appear to offer practitioners a place in the temporal and spatial net of spiritual kinship. Because transmission of the Dharma is said to be passed on personally from teacher to student, genealogical lines authenticate a teacher's spiritual power. Thus, a contemporary master's spiritual authority rests—at least in part—on the assumption that the master narrative of Zen, as described in koan stories, represents historical truth.

As contemporary research has shown, traditional lineage diagrams bear little resemblance to the actual history of Zen. Traditional diagrams portray lineage as straight-line succession. That is, each teacher was given personal transmission of the Dharma by one teacher and was thus part of one particular lineage. In reality, however, masters often had awakening experiences with various teachers as they roamed around on pilgrimage and thus created a complex net of lineal relationships (McRae, 2004: 7). And, even though Zen espouses face-to-face transmission, succession was sometimes sanctioned long after a master died.

The master narrative glosses over such disjunctions. It professes to provide the transfer of spiritual power from one generation to the next with the sanction of tradition—without which this transfer would be fraught with difficulty. Thus it is clear that the deconstruction of the master narrative threatens spiritual authority. Not only would the legitimacy of Dharma transmission be in question, but the highlighting of disjunctions in the history of Zen could bring about institutional instability, and a propensity for fragmentation and schism. This goes some way towards explaining why scholarly research into the history of Zen is still viewed with apathy and suspicion by most practitioners.

Cracks between practitioners of Zen on one side and historians on the other began to show in the 1950s when the historian Hu Shi and D. T. Suzuki engaged in a bitter verbal duel. Hu Shi fired the first shot:

> Ch'an can be properly understood only in its historical setting just as any other Chinese philosophical school must be studied and understood in its historical setting. (Hu, 1953: 3)

Suzuki countered with an attack redolent of arrogance:

> Vis-a-vis Zen, there are at least two types of mentality: the one which can understand Zen and, therefore, has the right to say something about it, and another which is utterly unable to grasp what Zen is. The difference between the two types is one of quality and is beyond the possibility of mutual reconciliation. (Suzuki, 1953a: 3)

Nevertheless, historians continued their research into the history of Zen. As Heine points out:

> Historians have demonstrated that Zen lacks a sense of its own historiography in that its historical writings are not reliable as factual accounts but are actually involved in producing a kind of mythical-legendary "pseudohistory". (Heine, 1994: 253)

How is it that the crack between the traditional narrative on one side, and the history of Zen on the other side widened into a chasm? Since the clash between Shi and Suzuki, research into the history of Zen has made great strides. The Dunhuang manuscripts began to be analysed in the nineteen-fifties. And, by the nineteen-eighties, ground-breaking research on Zen history by Japanese scholars such as Seizan Yanagida began to be translated and studied by Western historians. Their own research then resulted in landmark publications, such as *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Phillip Yampolsky 1967)*, The Rhetoric of Immediacy* (Bernard Faure 1991), *The Northern School of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism* (John McRae, 1983), *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Dale S. Wright 1998), *The Bodhidharma Anthology* (Jeffrey L. Broughton 1999), *The Koan* (Stephen Heine and D. S. Wright 2000), *Seeing through Zen* (John McRae 2003) and many others. These publications transformed historians' view of Zen. In contrast, the master narrative basically remained the same and so the gap became a chasm.

It was not just finding new facts that changed the way historians thought about Zen. Some publications, especially the work of Faure, Wright, and McRae encouraged a critical look at how our present-day view of Zen is formed and coloured by many layers of cultural bias.

2.2. The problem of cultural bias

The term ‘bias’ has a negative connotation and one could instead say ‘way of understanding’. However, I use the term ‘bias’ because it seems to me that contemporary Zen suffers from a blithe adoption of ways of understanding that stem from other cultures and eras. Today in the West we look at Zen through the eyes of Japanese teachers and scholars, as well as through the eyes of Song Dynasty adepts. It is as if we view the history of Zen through layers of coloured glass—each layer representing a particular prejudice—with the records of ‘immediacy’ sitting behind many layers.

An example of bias is the idea that the Tang Dynasty (618-907) was the ‘golden age’ of Zen and then declined in the Song (960-1279). First created in the Song, we find echoes of this idea in Japan, and its story line lingers on in the West. Ruth Fuller Sasaki suggested that koan collections of earlier masters were adopted in the Song because of ‘the decline in the high level of creative genius with which the earlier masters had been endowed’ (1966: 10). We can see in this example how a particular bias can persist and influence people’s judgement even a millennium later. This danger also applies to our own cultural bias—which appears to us as the ‘truth’. Wright comments: ‘Far more than we produce understanding, we are immersed in it’ (1998: 43).

Because we are immersed in understanding, we cannot escape preconception. There is no platform from which one could view the history of Zen and its koans with true objectivity. However, it is helpful to reassess one’s view of Zen by engaging with contemporary research. In the last decades, Zen scholars have examined medieval Chinese texts that came to light in the last century and consequently portray a picture of Chan in the Tang and Song that differs markedly from the grand saga of Zen.

3. The genesis of koans in the Tang and Song

3.1. The origins of the term 'koan'

The word *gongan* in Chinese means 'public case'. Originally it was a term connected with the law in medieval China. *Gongan* literally means 'bench' (*an)* of a 'magistrate' (*gong)*. By extension, this came to signify a written brief sitting on a magistrate's table (Foulk, 2000: 18). A further meaning of *Gong* is 'public,' or 'official,' or 'unbiased' (Foulk, 2000: 19). Foulk points out that the first recorded usage of the term *gongan* in the mid-ninth century did not refer to the old cases of the patriarchs, but was used to compare the spiritual power of a Chan master to the legal authority of a magistrate. The term implied that a master had the authority to sit in judgment of another's insight and could mete out punishment. We find an example of this in the biography of Zhun Cunsu, a mid-ninth century disciple of Huangbo Xiyun:

> Seeing a monk coming, the master said, "Yours is a clear-cut case (*chien-cheng kung-an)* but I release you of the thirty blows."
> (Foulk, 2000: 19)

The earliest known case where *gongan* took on the meaning of 'recorded incident' appears just once in 'Master Xuedou Chongxian's Verses on One Hundred Koans*'* which was compiled in the eleventh century (Foulk, 2000: 19). Eventually the term *gongan* or *kōan* (Japanese) came to imply a public benchmark of insight and referred to sayings or stories of masters that could be used to gauge insight or as a sustained focus of meditation.

3.2. Blueprints for koans

When Buddhist scholars and teachers came to China they encountered a problem: Indian texts seemed obscure to the Chinese. Chan solved this problem by modelling the recorded sayings and dialogues of Chan masters on the Confucian Analects.[7] This literary genre had the advantage that it was not only familiar to the Chinese intelligentsia; it also showed some similarities with the structure of early Indian and Mahāyāna sūtras. Here is an example:

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[7] Confucius lived from 551–479 BCE.

> The Master said, "'Wearing a shabby hemp-quilted gown, yet capable of standing unabashed with those who wore fox and badger.' That would apply quite well to Yu, would it not?
>
> Who harmed none, was foe to none,
> Did nothing that was not right."
>
> Afterwards Cu-lu (Yu) kept on continually chanting those lines to himself. The Master said, "Come now, the wisdom contained in them is not worth treasuring to that extent!" (Waley, 1938: 144)

Though this example lacks the punch and pith of Song dynasty koans, there are some interesting parallels. The story reads like a real-time transcript; the protagonists appear as master and disciple; comments are framed in a verse—all these are aspects of a blueprint later used for Chan encounter stories.[8] In the following I trace the development of this blueprint.

The emergence of koans is linked to two new literary genres in the Tang, 'lamp records' (*tenglu*) and 'recorded sayings' (*yulu*). 'Lamp records' are hagiographical genealogies from which material was later used to compile koan collections. The development of 'lamp records' is one of the unique contributions of Chan to Chinese and world literature. They are retrospective documents that '…looked to the past to justify the present' (Welter, 2004: 138). Morten Schlűtter endorses this point:

> Lamp histories are to be taken not as historical documents but as religious literature reflecting the concerns and needs of the ages in which they were compiled. (Schlűtter, 2000: 195, n. 54)

'Recorded sayings' (*yulu*), on the other hand, are anthologies of masters' words and deeds. They include dialogues and other interactions between the master and students, as well as oral teachings in the form of lectures (*shangtang*), and verses or short essays. All display a style and content reflective of the master's characteristic approach to Chan' (Welter, 2002) .[9]

It was common practice for students in the Tang to keep notebooks recording the content of teachings and interactions with masters. Welter explains:

> The slogan for Chan, "a special transmission apart from the teachings" may reflect the origins of *yulu* as oral tradition written in private notes ... As they were brought up for discussion, commented on and critiqued, *yulu* were subtly altered and enhanced as they were filtered through the memories of successive generations… The practice of raising a story, questioning and

[8] It is interesting to note that Cu-lu is here said to have used a practice of contemplation in order to remember and treasure his master's words.

[9] Unpaginated web source.

> commenting on it, is amply evident in Chan transmission records that we possess from this period. (Welter, 2002)

The earliest surviving record of such notes is the 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' *(Zutang ji)*, compiled in 952. Transforming rough notes into sleek koans was a process that spanned many centuries. In the following I focus on records from the Tang and show how koan culture developed from the first rudimentary questions to fully-formed encounter dialogues.[10]

3.3. The Dunhuang find

In 1900, a Taoist priest called Wang Yuanlu accidentally stumbled upon a sacred Buddhist site near Dunhuang, an oasis town on the Silk Road in Northwest China. He discovered a small cave containing thousands of preserved ancient sutra scrolls, paintings and sculptures. Six years later, Marc Aurel Stein, an employee of the British Government, came to China and—learning of Wang's find—rushed to Dunhuang. Finally Stein was able to persuade Wang to show him the cave and described the experience as follows: "When I looked in through a small hole, my eyes opened wide in surprise". By the light of a candle, Stein could see ancient sutra scrolls heaped up in piles several metres high. The cave that Stein saw was part of a system of nearly five hundred grottoes filled with Buddhist artifacts and scriptures. Elaborate wall paintings and carvings depict life and practice in the Tang.

Wang's discovery, the Mogao Grottoes, yielded fifty thousand Buddhist scriptures, amongst them a library of previously lost early Chan literature, laid down between 750 and the 900s (Broughton, 1999: 96). Stein quickly had three thousand sutra scrolls and five hundred paintings crated and shipped them off to the British Museum in London from where they were distributed to other libraries worldwide.[11]

Of particular interest in the study of koan development are two scriptures found in this collection, the 'Records of the Bodhidharma Anthology', and the 'Record of the Masters and Disciples of the *La≡kāvatāra'*.

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[10]My outline of the history of koans leans heavily on John McRae's ground-breaking book *Seeing Through Zen*.

[11] http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=4,183,0,0,1,0 accessed 1 May 2007, *The Buddhist Channel*> 'Wounds of time to Dunhuang grottoes aired'.

3.4. The 'Bodhidharma Anthology' (6th century)

The seven-piece collection of manuscripts that scholars refer to as the 'Bodhidharma Anthology'[12] is a fascinating source. It was most likely compiled in the first half of the sixth century (Broughton, 1999: 53 and 137: note 1) and contains a few dialogues that foreshadow[13] later encounter dialogues. Here is an example from the first Record:

> An adept asks: "What kind of mind is that which is not awakened and does not know?"
>
> The Master is silent. (Broughton 1999: 19)

The Master's response is reminiscent of Vimalak×rti's silence as described in the *Vimalak×rti Nirdeśa Sūtra.*[14] The story there goes that a group of Bodhidsattvas were asked about the entrance to 'non-duality'. After all had spoken, Mañjuśrī asked Vimalakīrti for his answer. Vimalakīrti's presentation was silence—which was taken by all present to be the highest wisdom.[15] Similarly, in the story above, the master's silence would have been understood as a teaching—otherwise the interaction would not have been recorded for posterity.

In the second Record there are two dialogues between Master Yuan and his students that are of special significance because they were taken up and fashioned into koans by later teachers. We do not know who Master Yuan was. Broughton calls him 'a forgotten disciple' of Bodhidharma (1999: 84). The first dialogue is as follows:

> The student asks, "Teach me, your disciple, to quiet the mind."
>
> Master Yuan answered, "Bring me your mind here and I will quiet it for you." (Broughton 1999: 42)

The second dialogue is as follows:

> "Administer confession to me, your disciple."
>
> "Bring your sins here, and I will administer confession."
>
> "Sins lack any characteristic of form that can be apprehended."
>
> "My administration of confession to you is over. Go to your quarters."

[12] In this collection of manuscripts little if anything is traceable to Bodhidharma himself.
[13] Hori points out that it was thought for some time that Daoist 'pure conversation' (*qingtan*) was a forerunner to koans (Hori, private communication, 6 June, 2007).
[14] The *Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sūtra* is an Indian Mahāyāna sūtra first translated into Chinese in the third century CE.
[15] An elaboration of this can be found in Wang, 2001.

(Broughton, 1999: 42)

Both interchanges were recycled in the Song. They reappear in the 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' (*Zutang ji*) compiled in 952. Here the dialogues are similar, but the protagonists have changed. We now see Huike begging Bodhidharma to pacify his mind, and Sengcan asking Huike to administer confession. The change of protagonists shows the emergence of the master narrative. The stories now support the 'standard patriarchal transmission for the first three generations, Bodhidharma to Huike to Sengcan' (Broughton, 1999: 88).

These two stories were further recycled. The first one re-appeared three hundred years later as Case 41 in the *Wumenkuan*. The dialogue between Huike and Bodhidharma now reads as follows:

> "Your disciple's mind has no peace as yet. I beg you, Master, please put it to rest."
>
> "Bring me your mind, and I will put it to rest."
>
> "I have searched for my mind, but I cannot find it."
>
> "I have completely put it to rest for you."
>
> (Aitken, 1991: 248)

The second dialogue reappeared as the enlightenment story of Huike and his disciple Sengcan as Case 30 in the 'Transmission of the Light' (*Denkōroku*) compiled by Keizan Jōkin in the 13th century. Here the story goes as follows:

> The thirtieth patriarch, was Great Master Jianzhi [Sengcan]. He visited the twenty-ninth patriarch and said, "My body is infected with leprosy. I beg you, O priest, to cleanse me of my wrongdoing."
>
> The Patriarch said, "Bring me your wrongdoing and I will cleanse you."
>
> The master paused awhile and then said, "When I look for my wrongdoing, I cannot find it."
>
> The Patriarch replied, "I have already cleansed you of your wrongdoing. You must rely on Buddha, Dharma, and Community of believers."
>
> (Cook, 2003: 158)

The process of recycling and transforming koans—as shown in the examples above—illustrates three important points. The first one is that koans are not historical documents. The second point is that koans are collaborative efforts over many generations of teachers. The third point is that some koans include a dimension of spiritual politics. That is, they were sometimes used to shore up lineage legends.

Most importantly, koan stories embody teachings. Legends like those woven around Bodhidharma express spiritual truths that are independent of cultural context. 'Bodhidharma' is an idealised image of a sage, rather than a historical personage. He is

like a blank canvas on which generations of Zen practitioners have projected their view of Zen.[16]

3.5. ‘Record of the Masters and Disciples of the *La≡kāvatāra’* (*720*CE)

The Dunhuang caves also yielded a text called the ‘Record of the Masters and Disciples of the *La≡kāvatāra* (*Lengqie shizi ji).* It was written about 720 and is associated with the Northern School of Chan (Broughton, 1999: 101). The practice of asking questions that masters in the Northern School cultivated is another stepping stone in the development of koan culture.

Here are two questions attributed to Hongren:

> “There is a single little house filled with crap and weeds and dirt—what is it?”
> “If you sweep out all the crap and weeds and dirt and clean it all up, so there is not a single thing left inside, what is it?” (McRae, 2000: 57)

Although these bare questions seem a world away from the polished encounter dialogues of the Song, they nevertheless function as koans.

The following questions are attributed to Shenxiu:

> Do you hear the sound of the striking of the bell?
> At the time of striking, does the sound exist?
> What kind of sound is the sound?
> (McRae, 2000: 57)

This is reminiscent of the koan ‘Stop the sound of the distant temple bell’.[17] Shenxiu’s questions are similar to ‘checking questions’ used in koan study to plumb the depths of a student’s insight into a particular koan.[18]

There is a deceptively simple question in the section attributed to Bodhidharma:

[16] A wide-ranging discussion about the evolving hagiography of Bodhidharma can be found in McRae, 2003: 24-28.
[17] This particular koan is used in some lineages that have their roots in the *Sanbōkyōdan*.
[18] I address the use of checking questions to test insight in chapter 5.

> The Great Master Bodhidharma also pointed at things and inquired of their meaning, simply pointing at a thing and calling out: "What is this?" (McRae, 2003: 85)

McRae interprets this question in a literal way. He suggests that Bodhidharma, having come from afar, was struggling to learn a new language and was pointing to things to find out what they were called (2000: 57). I see that as a limited interpretation. The question "what is it?" often emerges naturally out of a spiritual quest, whether a person practises within a Zen context or not. It is sometimes used as a koan by Zen teachers. A contemporary Zen student describes his experience with this question:

> The question "What is this?" that I had begun asking as a young teenager might also be seen as my first koan—since I was about 13 years old this was essentially what I asked myself all the time, not formulating it in this particular phrase, although these words express accurately the inquiry that would begin every morning almost as soon as I woke up and has continued throughout every day of my life since. With some surprise I recognized my question in the practice of asking "What is it?" or "What is this?" which is the *huatou* or life-long koan of Korean Zen students. [19]

We can glean from this example that the simple question 'what is it?' packs spiritual power. The fact that it was recorded as Bodhidharma's question means that it was deemed significant at the time—which would not have been the case had the question simply related to Bodhidharma groping for the meaning of words in a foreign tongue.

These examples show that by the early eighth century questions which probed a student's insight were circulating freely. After all, a question must have been well known and repeated often before it found its way into a record.

3.6. The 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' (952CE)

The 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' (*Zutang ji)* was discovered in the Korean monastery of Haein-sa in the nineteen-thirties. It is a 'lamp record', that is, a compilation of Chan stories that trace lineal relationships. The 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' was compiled by two disciples of Chan master Shengteng (884-972) of the Xuefeng lineage (Welter, 2004: 146). It was published in 952, well after the collapse of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and introduced a multi-lineal framework of transmission. The previous uni-lineal model acclaimed one master or 'patriarch' as the main recipient of the Dharma in each generation. In the 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' we see evidence of several lines of transmission, later called the "Five Houses" of Chan (Welter, 2004: 139).

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[19] IG, 13 November 2006.

The 'Anthology' holds a surprise: it seems to shows a jump to polished koan culture. Prior to the *Zutang ji*, we find records of sayings, questions and interchanges that are antecedents of koan, and then, next up, we are faced with a fully-fledged and sophisticated koan culture. There is no evidence of a bridge between the two. What might the reason be for this sudden jump? Are relevant records of the 8th and 9th centuries missing? Did koan culture developed as an oral tradition? Or did encounter dialogues only become fashionable in the Song? I discuss these questions further on.

The *Zutang ji* may well be a document on the edge between oral and written transmission. At the time of its compilation, China was still largely a 'manuscript' culture, although the art of printing had already been invented in the eighth century. Copying by hand was a more fluid transfer of information than printing. The copyist made inadvertent or intentional changes, left sections out or added text and so on. As Wright points out, the distinction between written text and verbal text was not as sharp as it was to become in the era of printing. (Wright, 2004: 112). The 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' may well signify a major shift, namely the 'written transmutation of an oral tradition' (McRae, 2003: 99).

McRae puts forward three stages of the oral-to-written process of koan stories. The first step was the initial transcription which involved changing the language into colloquial Chinese based on the spoken dialect current at the capital of Chang An. The second step was the circulation, evaluation, and selection of stories. In this way stories were modified after being passed around both orally and in written form. The third step was the editorial modification of stories, i.e. the process whereby editors and compiler modified the texts to make them more potent for the reader (2003: 99-100).

3.7. The '*Jingde* era of the Transmission of the Lamp' (1004CE)

The '*Jingde* Era of the Transmission of the Lamp' (*Jingde Chuandenglu),* published in 1004, quickly overshadowed the 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall'. It is a major example of a 'lamp record' (*tenglu*) and also presents a multi-lineal model of transmission. Following the *Anlushan* Rebellion (755-763) and the *Huichang* suppression of Buddhist establishments (c.841-846), Chan grew in regional bases, supported by local authorities. This support enabled Chan to become a major force for the spread of Buddhism in China. In this political climate it was important to ensure that a group of lineages were authorised instead of favouring one lineage above others—which the uni-lineal transmission did.

The lamp records of the Song promoted a common Chan style. The teaching mode of Mazu and his descendants formed the matrix around which a 'classic' Chan style emerged (Welter, 2004: 147). The *Jingde Chuandenglu* was the first Zen record to be received in official circles; its appearance marked the acceptance of Chan into the Song

establishment. It established certain norms and practices. These norms included enlightenment experiences as the culmination of Chan practice; confirmation of one's realisation by a recognised master as criterion for succession; the use of enlightenment verses; a dialogical style of interaction between master and disciple; an appreciation of the sacred in the mundane and trivial, and startling words and actions as a revelation of an enlightened state (Welter 2004: 155).

3.8. The 'Records of the Four Masters'

The 'Records of the Four Masters' *(Sijia lu*) was published in the first half of the eleventh century.[20] The four masters whose sayings were collected were all from the Hongzhou school: Mazu Daoyi, Baizhang Huaihai, Huangbo Xiyun, and Linji Yixuan. The two texts attributed to Huangbo Xiyun (d. 849) yield interesting information about the existence of private notes. These two texts are the 'Essentials of Mind Transmission' *(Chuanxin fayao)* and the 'Record of Wanling' *(Wanling lu).* The first one was compiled by the prominent official Peixiu only eight years after Huangbo's death. The 'Record of Wanling' was compiled by monks on Mount Po (Wright, 1998: 14). It circulated separately from the 'Essentials of Mind Transmission', until the two texts were joined together in the '*Jingde* era of the Transmission of the Lamp' before being published in the 'Records of the Four Masters'.

The records that Peixiu made of Huangbo Xiyun's teachings were augmented by private notes of senior disciples. Wright explains:

> For the most part, historians today follow the lead of Zen historian Yanagida Seizan in thinking that the elder monks at Huangbo Xiyun had in their possession "private notes" written and collected over the years of studying under the Zen master. (2004: 111)

Here we can catch a glimpse of the process that led to the collection and publication of koan stories. What kind of notes did the monks of Mt. Huangbo Xiyun record? Wright explains:

> What they took notes about were hard doctrinal issues, often employing the kinds of paradox that we find in the perfection of wisdom sutras. But the notes that went into that literature did not record bizarre behaviour and sayings.[21]

Even if these particular notes were not records of encounter dialogues, the fact that students of that time took notes is important. Albert Welter elaborates:

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[20] Jia, 2006: 53.
[21] Private communication, 31 January, 2007.

> It seems to have been an increasingly common practice at the time for students to keep note books recording the content of sermons, conversations, and interactions with masters. The earliest surviving record of such material is the *Zutang ji* [Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall].
> (Welter, 2002)

Interestingly enough, the practice of private notes describing encounters with a teacher persists to this day in some contemporary Zen lineages.

3.9. Did encounter dialogues happen in the Tang?

In determining historical accuracy, we stumble over our own contemporary bias. In our culture there is a clear dividing line between fiction and non-fiction. The divide is so sharp that any straying from non-fiction into fiction, or vice versa, is labelled a lie. Authorship is clearly defined and we uphold the concept of 'intellectual property'—although this idea is relatively recent, even in our own culture. In the Song the line between fiction and fact was diffuse and the concept of authorship fluid.

Did the stories about Tang masters really happen?

Scholars are divided on this point. In fact, two recent publications with a similar theme, Jinhua Jia's *The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism* (2006) and Mario Poceski's *Ordinary Mind is the Way* (2007)— both of which focus on the Hongzhou School—come up with diametrically opposed conclusions. Poceski maintains that

> We cannot trace any of the encounter dialogues back to the Tang period. No source from the Tang period indicates that there was even an awareness of the existence of the encounter-dialogue format, let alone that it was the main medium of instruction employed in Chan circles. (Poceski, 2007:11)

Jia, however, concludes that

> it is incorrect to say that the encounter dialogues in the ZTJ [*Zutang ji*] and CDL [*Jingde Chuandenglu*] were created completely by Chan monks of the Song dynasty, though they may actually have edited, polished, or added a great deal to the original materials. (2006: 52)

Zen scholars of today agree that most encounter stories are not historical accounts. But they harbour different views regarding the degree to which texts were transmutated.

Some scholars believe that there was a process of oral transmission prior to publication, whereas others regard all Tang encounter stories as Song fabrications.

In the following I review salient strands of evidence in support of each of these positions.

Poceski and Welter both focus on the fabrication of koan stories. In his analysis of the 'Record of Mazu', Poceski raises two points. The first point is that the dialogues of Mazu first appeared more than two hundred years after his death in 788. Though there are earlier texts, such as biographical inscriptions about Mazu dating back to 791, as well as three sermons attributed to him from about 830, none of these texts include dialogues. Poceski concludes:

> It was only from the second part of the tenth century onwards that stories that contain Mazu's and his disciples' iconoclastic dialogues came to shape the understanding of their religious thought and teaching methods, and the history of the *Hongzhou* school. (Poceski, 2004: 67)

McRae disagrees:

> There are enough dialogues concerning a large enough number of figures that it would seem heresy to suggest that nothing of the sort "really" happened, that the encounters were all fictional. (McRae, 2000: 69)

McRae's point may be valid. Some of Mazu's vivid encounters may have been recounted over and over. Such stories would have been the gossip with which monks entertained each other on their long walks of pilgrimage.

Poceski's second point is that in contrast to Mazu's sermons—which are quite similar in different editions—the dialogues show considerable variation. When Poceski examined two versions of an encounter between Mazu and his disciple Wuye, he came up with some interesting results. In the earlier version, Wuye describes the content of his enlightenment experience as follows:

> "All the myriad dharmas are created by the mind and are names only, devoid of any reality."

Mazu confirms his insight:

> "That is so. The nature of all dharmas is neither born nor perishable. All dharmas are fundamentally empty and quiescent."

He then segues into a lengthy discourse. In this version we see a conservative picture of Mazu's religious instruction in line with his sermons. In a later version, published in the 'Record of Mazu', Mazu does not comment on Wuye's experience:

> Wuye experienced awakening. He bowed to the Patriarch, who said, "This stupid fellow! What is this bowing all about?"

Here all trace of doctrinal explanation has disappeared and the story is in accord with popular notions of Chan's iconoclastic teaching methods. Poceski concludes that the later version of the story is not a record of an encounter between two eighth-century monks. Rather, '…it should be read as a record that reflects the transformation of the images of classical Chan that was taking place during the tenth and eleventh centuries' (2004:71). Indeed, Poceski's research seems to catch Song practitioners in the act of fabrication.[22]

Welter also focuses on the 'literary transmutation'[23] of koans. He examines variations of Linji's famous 'True person of no rank'. This koan first appeared in the 'Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall' in the following version:

> On one occasion, the Master [Linji] addressed the assembly: "I, a mountain monk, tell you clearly—within the body-field of the five skandhas there is a true man with no-rank, always present, not even a hair's breadth away. Why don't you recognize him?"
>
> Then, a monk asked: "What is this true man with no rank?"
>
> The Master struck him, and said: "The true man with no-rank—what an impure thing."

Later, in the Record of Linji the story has changed:

> The Master ascended the hall and said, "Here in this lump of red flesh there is a True Man with no rank. Constantly he goes in and out the gates of your face. If there are any of you who don't know this for a fact, then look! Look!
>
> At that time there was a monk who came forward and asked, "What is he like—the True Man with no rank?"
>
> The Master got down from his chair, seized hold of the monk and said, "Speak! Speak!"

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22 It is interesting to see in what way the earlier version of the encounter—which was originally based on the epitaph written by Yang Qian in 823—was changed in the Song (Jia, 2006: 48). The later version portrays Wuye as coming to awakening without resort to traditional forms of religious instruction (Poceski, 2004: 71).

23 Poceski terms the process of change 'literary transmutation' (2004: 67).

The monk was about to say something, whereupon the Master let go of him, shoved him away, and said, "True Man with no rank—what a shitty ass-wiper!"

(Watson, 1993: 13)

In this later version the language has become more vivid and actions are more dynamic (Welter, 2002). The comparison shows how stories were changed in line with changing ideals of enlightened speech and behaviour. The research by Poceski and Welter seems to show convincingly that encounter dialogues as we know them today are the product of an extensive 'literary transmutation' and do not represent teachings of the Tang.

However, this is only one side of the debate. Let us take a look at the evidence that encounter dialogue *was* practiced in the Tang. There are five strands of evidence which we need to take account of. The first strand of evidence regards the existence of oral transmission. McRae argues as follows:

> It is clear that there was oral transmission, or at the very least some forms of written transmission earlier than the texts we have. I say this because the earliest record of encounter dialogue, the *Zutangji* already contains examples of anecdotes that are commented on by teachers outside the lineages of the subjects of the original anecdotes. In other words, what we have in the *Zutangji* is a snapshot of encounter dialogue at a fairly early stage, but when a number of dialogues had already been circulated widely enough to merit comment from other teachers.[24]

This is an important point as it shows up the fact that monks on pilgrimage carried encounter stories from monastery to monastery. Masters from other monasteries or lineages then added layers of commentary.

The second strand of evidence regards the existence of 8th and 9th century epitaphs. In the epitaph for Fayun (d.766) there is the following interchange:

> "Has the Buddha's teaching been transmitted to you?"
>
> "I have a sandalwood image [of the Buddha] to which I pay reverence."
>
> [This reply was] profound yet brief, and those listening felt chills of loneliness. The day after [the questioner, a prominent official] left, Fa-yűn died without illness while sitting cross-legged, on his chair.
> (McRae, 1987: 95-96)

[24] Personal communication 2 December 2006.

This is a record of an early dialogue that would function as a koan and was deemed to be transformative ('…those listening could feel chills of loneliness').[25]

The third strand of evidence relates to 'separate notes'. Tracing back the early fragments of encounter dialogues attributed to Linji, Welter points out the following:

> At the end of Linji's record in the *Zutang ji*, the compilers note: "In addition [to what is recorded here], encounter dialogues (*yingji duita*) [involving Linji] appear extensively in a separate record (*bielu*)." …. "Separate Records" like the one mentioned for Linji here, were collections of encounter dialogues involving interactions between Linji and students or other masters. In addition to Linji, "Separate Records" are mentioned in relation to Changsha Jingcen and Yanguan in the *Zutang ji.* (Welter, 2002)

Although no examples of such 'separate records' are extant today, the evidence of the existence of such 'separate records' can be seen as a legitimate strand of evidence because it demonstrates that prior to 952 notebooks containing interactions of teachers with their peers and students were circulating widely.

The fourth strand of evidence consists of datable or reliable records of encounter dialogue in the Tang. Of special interest here is Jinhua Jia's work. She based her research in the main on datable stele inscriptions and epitaphs. Jia maintains that the emergence of formal encounter dialogue rolled out in two phases. The first phase was the emergence of encounter dialogue in the mid-Tang period, roughly from the mid-eighth to the mid-ninth century. This type of dialogue was characterised by witty, indirect, and paradoxical phrases, as well as by fictionalised accounts of enlightenment experiences. Here is a dialogue between Ehu Dayi and the Emperor Shunzong when he was the Crown Prince. It is from an epitaph written by Wei Chuchou in 818:

> The prince asked, "What is Buddha-nature?"
>
> Dayi answered, "It does not leave that which Your Highness is asking."
>
> Then the prince silently understood the mysterious teaching.
>
> (Jia, 2006: 49)

Another example of this phase is Wuye's first visit to Mazu (Jia, 2006: 48). Even before Wuye begins his prostration in preparation for asking his question, Mazu quips about his fine stature which was said to be 'stalwart like a standing mountain'. Mazu says: "What a lofty Buddha hall! But no Buddha inside it!"

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[25] The 'chills of loneliness' could also have been a response to the loss of the Master. However, the interchange is supposed to have happened a day before Fayun's death. This implies that 'chills of loneliness' were not a response to Fayun's death, but to his profound reply.

Further evidence of the emergence of encounter dialogues can be found in Chan master Guifeng Zongmi's 'Chan Preface' written in 833 (Broughton 2004: 15). He described the interaction between Chan masters and students as follows:

> When someone asked how to cultivate the Way, [the master] answered there was no need for cultivation. When someone sought liberation, [the master] asked who bound him…If someone asked how to pacify mind when dying, [the master] said there was originally not a thing…In a word, they just followed the conditions and responded to the encounters at the given moments. (2006: 49)

Zongmi's description clearly points to the use of paradoxical language by masters in response to a question.

According to Jia, the second phase of formal encounter dialogue rolled out in the period of the late Tang and early Five Dynasties (907-960), that is, from mid-ninth century to mid-tenth century. In this period encounter dialogue achieved its full maturity (Jia, 2006: 48). The second phase was marked by the emergence of fictionalized accounts of enlightenment experiences.

Finally, as the fifth strand of evidence, there is the question of individual style. Welter maintains that all Tang dynasty encounter dialogues are fictionalized accounts and all 'antics and enigmatic utterances of the Chan masters transmission histories conformed to a predetermined style of appropriate "Chan-like" behaviour' (Welter, 2004:143). One aspect remains unexplained in such a scenario of fabrication: one can detect different styles in the sayings and actions attributed to individual masters. If the actions and saying were created to a 'predetermined style of appropriate "Chan-like" behaviour', one would expect more uniformity.

When we look at these five strands of evidence, none is strong enough on its own. Taken together, however, they show a high probability that encounter dialogue was actually practised in the Tang. But the physical actions, the blows and shouts and other presentations that we know from Song accounts, were not in evidence before the late Tang. Mazu, for example, seems to have taught with his lips and not with his body. It is only in the third generation after Mazu that we have evidence of eccentric actions. Jia quotes the *stūpa* inscription for Yangshan, written by Lu Xisheng in 895:

> [Yangshan] intended to guide the students by interrupting [their train of thought] directly, and nobody could do so as well as he could. However, the students often lost the point. Raising eyebrows, knocking with a wooden stick, and pointing to objects, they imitated each other, little short of making fun. This was not the Master's fault. (Jia, 2006: 50)

This example shows that masters in the late Tang used ‘unusual’ actions to bring students to awakening and that these were regarded as signs of realisation by those who themselves had insight.

The really important question may not be whether masters in the Tang used encounter dialogue and ‘strange’ antics or not; but how such encounters were interpreted at the time. It seems that what came to practitioners’ attention began to change in the late Tang. Masters began to be noticed and remembered not so much by their sermons but by their pithy sayings and strange antics. I think it is precisely the divergence and ambiguity of evidence in respect of encounter dialogue that reveals a paradigm shift in late Tang dynasty Chan. This paradigm shift meant that the view of how one could best express insight changed dramatically. Sermons slowly became obsolete and ‘unusual’ actions and dramatic encounters were now deemed to show the ‘true’ expression of an enlightened mind. Wright comments as follows:

> The bizarre sayings that are later added to Huangbo, Mazu and others would have been unthinkable and incomprehensible in their own time—it would have been grounds then for regarding them as highly unenlightened, rather than enlightened as it was in the Sung.[26]

Yet there must have been some appreciation of such interchanges—even if they were regarded as ‘unthinkable and incomprehensible’—otherwise Tang dynasty practitioners would not have passed on records of such behaviour. It was later in the Song that such interchanges were upheld as examples of enlightened speech and action.

What was the trigger for such a sea-change?

It may well be that innovative teaching by masters of the Hongzhou School triggered the paradigm shift. Their new doctrine was viewed by contemporaries with some disquiet. Here is a description of it, written by Zongmi:

> The idea of the Hongzhou school is that the arising of the mind, a movement of thought, a snapping of fingers, a tinkling of musical chimes, a spreading of a fan, all action and all doing are the function of the entire essence Buddha-nature. (Jia 2006:76)

All actions and activities in everyday life were now seen as expressions of the Way (Jia, 2006: 76). The Dharma began to be expressed more with physical presentations and performances than with words. Because the *Hongzhou* School became the dominant style, Chan masters in the Song emulated the Hongzhou style of teaching with its dramatic actions and interchanges. Koan stories describing such dramatic encounters became imbued with special significance and were accorded a central place in practice.

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[26] Private communication, 31 January 2007.

3.10. Dahui's *Kanhua Chan*

The grand narrative of Zen assumes that koans and the practice of their introspection were always intertwined. But in actual fact, the practice of holding koans at the centre of attention during seated meditation is a relatively late innovation.

Foulk states the following:

> Prior to the development of contemplating phrases in Sung China…there is no evidence whatsoever that the practices of holding up, commenting on, and collecting old cases were ever associated with the practice of seated meditation, or indeed with any sort of "meditation" in the sense of a disciplined effort to alter one's state of mind. (2000: 8)[27]

However, it may be that the style of reading in medieval China already included a measure of contemplation. As Leclerc points out,

> In the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, they read usually not as today, principally with the eyes, but with the lips, pronouncing what they saw, and with the ears, listening to the words pronounced, hearing what is called the 'voices of the pages'. (1961: 38)

In fact, silent reading is a '…relatively recent development in world culture' (Williams, 1989: 38). If the practice of reading in medieval China was a measured and attentive savouring of words, it may well be that the gap between reading and koan introspection was smaller then than it is today.

The earliest mention of koan introspection can be found in the entry on Dongshan Liangjie (807-869) in the *Jingde Chuandenglu,* compiled in 1004. There the story goes that Dongshan asked for a phrase that would truly have earned Huineng the patriarchy, instead of 'since all is void'—a line from the poem that he supposedly wrote on the monastery wall.[28] An old monk is said to have come to Dongshan ninety-six times before his response was finally approved. This implies that he sat for weeks, months, or even years with this question. A younger disciple wanted to learn the monk's answer, and—frustrated after badgering him for three years—finally bailed up the old man with a knife to make him tell all (Schlǘtter, 2000: 180).

[27] Hori points out the following: All through the Tang, Chan monks were still performing a modified form of samatha-vipassana meditation. The meditation manual used was probably based on Chi-I's *Shao shih-kuan* (Cleary, 1997). (Private communication, June 6, 2007)

[28] There is no Bodhi-tree
Nor stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void,
Where can the dust alight?
(Price, 1985:18)

This dramatic story indicates that by the time that the *Jingde Chuandenglu* was compiled, some form of koan introspection already existed. By the middle of the eleventh century koan introspection was firmly established as a core practice of the Linji School. This was due to master Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163) who championed the practice of 'contemplating phrases' (*kanhua Chan)*.

The master narrative of Zen tells the story of a great conflict between Dahui and Hongzhi Zhenjue (1091-1157) who defended the 'silent illumination' of the Caodong tradition. But were these two masters really enemies? Western Zen inherited a view of this clash as seen by Japanese scholars and teachers. Their view was distorted by the fervent sense of lineal identity that characterises Zen in Japan, with each school sporting a distinctive mode of dress, liturgy, ritual, and doctrine (Sharf, 2002: 8). The controversy between Dahui and Hongzhi was made much of in Japanese Zen in order to authenticate their sectarian divergences. However, there seems to have been a cordial relationship between the two masters. That Hongzhi asked Dahui to be in charge of his funeral was mentioned in *Zen Dust* (Miura & Sasaki, 1966: 14) and reiterated in later research (Schlűtter, 1999: 109).

Dahui forms a watershed in the history of koans. He was the first to prescribe koan introspection as a method of contemplation—though there are indications that his teacher Yuanwu advocated a similar approach (Schlűtter, 2000: 180). Dahui taught students to focus on a single word or critical phrase (*huatou*) and alleged that this practice was a "short-cut" to enlightenment. This form of Chan practice was called *kanhua Chan*.

Dahui and his descendants were innovators who promoted koan introspection as a practice whereas Hongzhi and his line advocated a conservative use of koans as teaching tools.[29] Thus, a *Caodong* master might have based his discourse on a koan or used it as a probe to test insight, whereas teachers in the *Linji* School taught their students to focus on a koan's 'cutting phrase' during meditation.

[29] Hongzhi compiled two large koan collections, one of which later formed the basis of the 'Book of Equanimity' (Foulk 2000: 25).

4. Koan study in the Diamond Sangha

4.1. Contemporary views on koans

These days in the West the term 'koan' is used somewhat loosely. In fact, the label 'koan' is sometimes used to merely describe a difficult life question. Foulk observes the following:

> There is … a tendency among Western students of Zen at present to call anything that becomes the sustained focus of an existential problem or life crisis a "kōan," or to suggest that such a thing can be "used as kōans" to transform them from negative experiences into opportunities for spiritual growth. (Foulk, 2000: 26)

An example of this is a remark by Zen master Jan Chōzen Bays: 'Anytime we become upset or angry, right there we have been caught by a "new" koan'.[30] Though the link with tradition here is the Hongzhou school's dictum that all actions and activities in everyday life can be seen as expressions of the Way, Bays has cut loose the term 'koan' from its original meaning, retaining only a sense that something is difficult to resolve.

Some scholars focus on koans as carriers of information. According to Heine and Wright, koans have five dimensions, i.e. they carry information about ritual, institutional, literary, and popular religious aspects (2000: 6). Do they also carry historical information?

Many Zen practitioners make the assumption that koans are carriers of historical information, as well as being agents of transformation. D.T. Suzuki espoused this view and it is still firmly entrenched in the West. Only in the last decades has critical research shown that Zen stories cannot be used to construct a historical narrative. As Wright points out, the historical information that koans carry is primarily about the period of their creation[31]. Though koans are formulated as though they were 'live' records of historical interchanges, this sense of immediacy is a literary device.

Are koans simply means to an end or do they have value in and of themselves? There are two different camps here. Following Hee-jin Kim's terms, one could be labelled 'instrumentalist' and the other 'realisational' (Kim 1985b, cited in Hori, 2000: 281). The 'instrumentalist' view is that a koan is a psychological device to either induce

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[30] Bays, 1988, unpaginated websource.

[31] Wright, personal communication 21 May 2007.

realisation, or to effect self-improvement. In the following are some examples. John Tarrant, a Western Zen master, calls koans a 'poetic technology for bringing about awakening'. He continues:

> Although koans have made it into popular culture as riddles and wisecracks, they aren't all mystery and strangeness. They are intended to have an outcome, to work, to be effective in relieving unhappiness and, just as importantly, to be amusing. (Tarrant, 2003: 46-47)

Seung Sahn, a Korean master says:

> In the past, kong-an practicing meant checking someone's enlightenment. Now we use kong-ans to make our lives correct... You must use kong-ans to take away your opinions. When you take away your opinions, your mind is clear like space, which means from moment to moment you can reflect any situation and respond correctly and meticulously. (1992: 236)

Seung Sahn sees koans as instruments that effect a certain kind of consciousness. John Crook, psychologist and teacher has a more psychological take. He pronounces the function of koans to be '…the recalibration of a practitioner's attitudes and actions in life' (1997: 229). Here koans are seen as psychological tools for self-improvement. For some students it seems that the desire to improve oneself—which stems from a sense of being imperfect—declines when working with koans. A student comments: 'Through the work with koans I stopped trying to improve myself. I am now more interested in things as they are, than in some ideal fantasy of what they might become.'[32]

The following examples show a realisational approach to koans. Robert Aitken speaks about koans and koan study in his introduction to the *Wumenkuan:*

> *The Gateless Gate* is a collection of stories and verses that present fundamental perspectives on life and no-life, the nature of the self, the relationship of the self to the earth—and how these interweave. Such stories and verses are called kōans, and their study is the process of realizing their truths. (1990: xiii)

John Daido Loori states that the core of koan practice is the '…intimate and direct experience of the universe and its infinite facets' (Loori, 2006: 124).

Both Aitken and Loori see koans as the actualisation of the awakened mind. Asahina Sōgen understands the connection between koans and the awakened mind as follows:

[32] IG: 12 December, 2006.

> Kōans are expressions in words or actions of the enlightened state of mind of people who have gained awakening through the intimate practice of Zen. (Foulk, 2000: 38)

'Intimate practice' implies that awakening happens when the sense of a separate self falls away. Ruth Fuller-Sasaki expresses this as follows, using the term 'instrument' to mean the practitioner:

> The kōan is taken over by the prepared instrument, and, when a fusion of instrument and device takes place, the state of consciousness is achieved which it is the intent of the kōan to illuminate. (Wright, 2000: 206)

John Tarrant says that an intimate encounter with a koan can be 'so deep, as to become identity' (Tarrant, 1989: 105). This is the same point that Wumen Huikai (1184-1260) emphasised in his commentary to the koan *Mu:*

> You will walk hand in hand with all the Ancestral Teachers in the successive generations of our lineage—the hair of your eyebrows entangled with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears. (Aitken, 1990: 7)

As we can see in the examples above, Zen masters, scholars, and psychologists each have their own particular focus when describing koans. Zen masters tend to concentrate on their function as catalysts of awakening and as a moment-by-moment actualisation of enlightenment, scholars focus on form and provenance, and psychologists train the spotlight on their potential for emotional maturation—each group ending up with a different point of view.

4.2. Koans as paradoxes

Koans are odd. This oddness is irrespective of culture or language. As Wright points out, Chan rhetoric is '…eminently strange in relation to its own cultural context' (1993: 24). What is the reason for this strangeness? One reason is that the language of koans '…embodies the "ungraspability" of the matters about which they speak' (Wright, 1993: 26).

What is being spoken of cannot be explained or understood in conceptual terms. Wright discusses this conundrum as follows:

> We will be unable to determine conceptually what it is since it becomes manifest precisely *in* the emptiness that opens up when the practitioner is

> dislodged from the position of the subject who “represents” and “determines”. (1993: 34)

Not only is the language of koans odd. In addition, repeating the core question of a koan leads in itself to a sense of strangeness. In fact, any commonplace word or phrase will seem strange when repeated over and over. As Wright points out:

> Normality and common sense are maintained precisely in the fact that the everyday draws no attention to itself. On the rare occasions, when we do focus on an element of everyday life and really examine it… it quickly begins to look odd. (2000: 206)

The main reason for the oddness of koans is that most are paradoxical. The Concise Oxford Dictionary ascribes the following meanings to the word ‘paradox’:

> Statement contrary to received opinion; seemingly absurd though perhaps really well-founded statement; self-contradictory; essentially absurd statement. (Fowler, 1960: 862)

Take Yunmen Wenyan’s [33] declaration to his community: “Within heaven and earth, throughout space and time, there is one treasure in the body.”[34] What is this treasure? Yunmen says, “It walks to the Buddha-hall carrying a lantern; it takes the triple-gate and places it on the lantern.” How could one possibly place the huge entrance gate, through which all used to pass into a Chan monastery, upon a lantern? Here this koan moves from mystery to paradox. Reason is stymied; the intellect is stumped.

Is this a paradox? Insiders and outsiders hold different views. Ruth Fuller-Sasaki explains:

> The kōan is not a conundrum to be solved by a nimble wit. It is not a verbal psychiatric device for shocking the disintegrated ego of a student into some kind of stability. Nor, in my opinion, is it ever a paradoxical statement except to those who view it from outside. (Sasaki et al, 1965: xi)

To resolve a koan one has to access the same non-dual consciousness that it originated from. When that happens, the paradox is exposed as ‘common’ sense. The odd reveals itself as ordinary.

An experienced Zen practitioner writes:

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[33] Yunmen died 914 CE.
[34] The main body of this koan is a quote from the ‘Jewel Treasury Treatise’, a late Tang dynasty poem wrongly attributed to Sengchao who lived in the 6th century (Sharf, 2002: 188).

> I personally don't experience koans, even after passing them, as ceasing to be paradoxical—only that in order to experience what the koan has to offer I must ride over, or soar above, or obliterate in an ecstatic mood of devil-may-care, the illogicality of the koan... I don't think afterwards, "Well, that was only common sense after all". It is as if I had to let go of common sense *logic*—that something is either real or not real, true or not true—in order to experience something in my life *sub specie aeternitatis.* When this is allowed to happen I have a vivid sense that the ordinary is wonderful and even sacred, i.e. that things like chopping wood and drawing water, or getting up in the morning, are living the life of Buddha.[35]

This example indicates that the paradoxical nature of the koan invites the practitioner to let go of their habitual ways of seeing the world in order to experience ordinary life in a new and vivid way.

4.3. Koans and realisation

As we have seen, Zen adepts focus on the transformational aspect of koans and speak of 'awakening', or 'enlightenment'. What is meant by this?

Through the works of D. T. Suzuki, 'enlightenment' as a term for the highest aspiration in Buddhism became firmly entrenched in the English language. The choice of this term as a translation of *bodhi* (awakening) drew not only upon the European tradition of Rationalism, it also had its roots in Romanticism:

> Whereas *Enlightenment* thinkers typically assumed the progressive triumph of *logos* over *mythos*, romantics would criticize the shallowness of rationality and seek wisdom in ancient myths. (Wright, 1998: 183)

The term 'enlightenment' is problematical because of the many connotations it carries. Some Zen teachers and scholars use the term 'awakening' or 'realisation' instead of 'enlightenment'. Others use the traditional Japanese terms *kenshō* or *satori* when referring to the experiences of realisation.[36] The usual translation for *kenshō* is 'seeing into one's nature'—which implies a dualism between the seer and the seen.

There is a school of thought, spearheaded by Robert Sharf, which maintains that the emphasis on the experience of awakening as a pinnacle of Zen practice is a relatively recent focus. He points out that the Japanese terms for experience—*keiken* and *taiken*—

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[35] Arthur Wells, personal communication 10 February 2007.

[36] In the following I adopt the term 'realisation' for the experiences implied by the terms 'enlightenment', 'kenshō', 'satori', 'awakening' etc.

were adopted in the early Meiji period to render the Western terms ‘experience’ and *Erlebnis,* and that one searches in vain for pre-modern Chinese or Japanese equivalents to the phenomenological notion of ‘experience’ (1993: 22). Sharf infers that this means that the focus on the experiential aspect of realisation has sneaked into Zen from the West:

> “Zen” that so captured the imagination in the West was in fact a product of the New Buddhism of the Meiji. Moreover, those aspects of Zen most attractive to the Occident—the emphasis on spiritual experience and the devaluation of institutional forms—were derived in large part from Occidental sources. Like Narcissus, Western enthusiasts failed to recognize their own reflection in the mirror being held out to them. (Sharf, 1993: 39)

The German word *Erlebnis* includes the words *Leib* (body) and *Leben* (life) in its etymology. So we could say that ‘experience’—the translation of *Erlebnis*—includes the meaning of ‘embodied wisdom’. In classical Chan literature we can find key passages that point to the importance of ‘embodied wisdom’. Just one of many examples is Wumen’s commentary on the koan *Mu.* He exhorts students to ‘make your whole body a mass of doubt, and with your three hundred and sixty bones and joints and your eighty-four thousand hair follicles concentrate on this one word’ (Aitken 1990: 7).

Sharf grudgingly concedes that some pre-modern masters may have experienced ‘transformative insight’ (1995: 259), and that Dahui and Hakuin ‘appear to have emphazised a “flash of insight”’(1995: 266). Thus we can say that even in cultures where there is no term for ‘experience’, realisation is portrayed as sudden knowledge or embodied wisdom—which is a way of expressing that at its core lies personal experience.

A host of problems arise when discussing an experience of realisation. The first one is that speaking about realisation is itself a paradox. As Wright points out, ‘experience and language “co-arise”’ (1998: 68). This means that the language of enlightenment arises out of the process of awakening and that such an experience is not unmediated by language. In the process of realisation the sense of separation between ‘self’ and ‘other’ falls away and so realisation cannot be ‘talked about’, that is, it cannot be described discursively, as this implies a separation between subject and object.[37]

Problems are compounded by the fact that as soon as we try to analyse the experience of realisation, we immediately move into a mind-set of separation, and the language we use is no longer relevant to the experience. Tarrant says:

[37] Wright comments that consciousness always includes cognition and non-cognition because they co-arise and cannot be separated (personal communication, 21 May 2007).

> Authentic description is difficult because the distinctions that language depends on, such as those between subject and object, are not utterly true to experience. (1989: 102)

Realisation is not a discrete state, like a spot in the landscape that can be located by its coordinates. Yet the outcome can be described: realisation results in a vivid and personal experience of the nature of reality. However, no realisation experience is ever the same. As Tarrant points out, 'the single word 'satori' contains endless gradations of meaning, depending on the depth and clarity of the experience' (1989: 104).

In Hori's interesting article on koan practice and realisation, he uses the term *kenshō* to denote the consciousness not only at the moment of awakening but as the enduring change after realisation. It seems to me more useful to view the transformation of consciousness as two phases. Thus the 'awakening mind' is the consciousness in the experience of realisation, and the 'awakened mind' is the consciousness in the wake of such an experience.

The 'awakening mind' is characterised by the experience of self as other, other as self. This state of consciousness passes after a period of time—whether it be minutes or hours. What remains afterwards is the 'awakened mind'. This is the mind that knows from its own experience that the subject-object split is purely a convention and that the 'self' is only a provisional reality. Consequently, less and less time is spent ruminating about oneself, and the idea of 'self' can be burned up in the intense focus of a particular action. In contrast, the 'awakening mind' does not know about the provisional reality of the 'self', because 'there is a kind of cognition that does not get caught up in the subject/object divide'.[38] It is only afterwards that the experience can be explored cognitively.

Is there cognition at the moment of awakening? I do not hold that the 'mind of awakening' is a pure and unmediated consciousness that is later tainted by conceptual activity. The process of experience implies some cognitive functions. As Hori says, 'if conceptual activity were subtracted from experience, whatever remained would not be meaningful; it might not even qualify for the label "experience"' (2000: 284). This implies that at the moment of awakening there is a kind of cognition which does not get caught in a subject/object divide. Hori points out that the Zen phrase 'One sword cuts into one piece' symbolises a discrimination that is non-dual (2003: 14). The image of a sword is a reminder of Manjusri's sword of wisdom and to 'cut into one' is clearly a reference to the non-dual nature of reality.

Unique about the moment of awakening 'is the fact that the seeing subject "realizes" (both comprehends and instantiates the fact) that it is not separate and distinct from the object it is seeing' (Hori, 2000: 292). I would say that Hori is describing two phases that follow closely upon another, 'instantiation' (in my terms, the 'awakening mind') and

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[38] Wright, personal communication, 21 May 2007.

‘comprehension’ (the ‘awakened mind’). One must bear in mind that such temporal distinctions are to some extent artificial, as notions of ‘before’ and ‘after’ are expressions of duality. In contrast, the experience of awakening appears entire.

Often an initial opening will be incomplete and further practice will help to spark off further realisation experiences that open and deepen the initial insight. Problematic in Hori’s description of *kenshō* is that it is a ‘one size fits all’ model of realisation. In reality the experience of awakening can be shallow and fleeting or profound and irreversible. The depth of the experience defines its transformational power and lasting impact. Thus, the term ‘realisation’ or ‘awakening’ refers to a series of transformative experiences of different depths.

Insight is deepened each time a ‘benign catastrophe’[39] of awakening happens. The process finally leads exactly to where one started from: the complete ordinariness of the moment. Tarrant touches on this when he describes realisation as ‘an utter and resonant naturalness’ (1989: 127). A student describes this experience as follows:

> We already know. It’s already complete. And we have to go through all of the process to get back to recognize that again in a real, deep, lasting way. (Tarrant, 1989: 113)

In his introduction to the *Wumenkuan,* Robert Aitken describes the process of awakening as follows:

> What may be known abstractly becomes personal, a vital experience of one’s own. For example: the notion of transcendental oneness becomes a vivid experience of a shared and unbounded nature, and the thought of compassion is felt profoundly in a way that is consistent with its etymology: “suffering with others”.
>
> (Aitken, 1990: xiii)

Aitken indicates here that embodiment is a key aspect of awakening. Triggers for a realisation experience can be anything—the call of a bird, the flush of a toilet, a glimpse of colour, or a word read in passing. A koan itself is not necessarily the ultimate trigger for such an experience, but the patient work with it creates readiness for realisation.

Once a student has had a significant experience, their teacher needs to assess its magnitude and range. Koans are a performative way of gauging insight. Loori comments:

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[39] Tarrant, 1989: 126.

> It can be said that there is no "answer" to a koan. Seeing into a koan is a manifestation of a state of consciousness rather than an intellectual understanding of a point of the dharma. It is this direct "seeing into" that the teacher looks for and tests to determine the clarity of the student's understanding.[40]

Though there may be no absolute measure, the student's insight will show up in the freedom and clarity with which students can respond to koan questions.

4.4. Resolving a koan

When a student first takes up a koan, it is experienced as an object of consciousness. This approach has dual aspects: the thinker, and the koan that is thought about. However, as Hori points out, the koan is 'both an object of consciousness and the subjective activity of consciousness seeking to understand the kōan' (2003: 288). The person groping for an answer to a koan is actualising the koan in the very act of seeking for it.

Hori offers an interesting analysis of this. He maintains that koans are utterances that are both descriptive and performative at the same time.[41] An example of a performative utterance in ordinary language is: "I apologise". This utterance not only talks about something, it is the very thing that is talked about: Saying this phrase is the performance of apologising. We can also find sayings that are both descriptive and performative in everyday usage. These sayings are usually seen as puns. Hori gives the following example:

> A: "What is the difference between ignorance and apathy?"
> B: "I don't know and I don't care." (Hori, 2000: 305)

Koans such as Zhaozhou's response "Oak tree in the garden" in answer to the question "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?"[42] function in a similar way. The response is descriptive and performative—both at the same time.

In his otherwise excellent book *Seeing through Zen,* McRae takes at stab at 'solving' the following koan:

> A monk asked Dongshan, "What is 'Buddha'?"
> Dongshan replied, "Three pounds of hemp."

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[40] Loori, D., '*Dogen's 300 koans and the Kana Shobogenzo', http://www.mro.org/mr/archive/21-1/articles/dogens300.html,* accessed: 20 November, 2006.
[41] See Hori (2000: 304-305) for an interesting discussion of koans as description and performance.
[42] *Wumenkuan*, case 37.

McRae confidently shows up the ‘amusing errors’ of Dōgen and other masters. According to McRae, the reference to ‘three pounds of hemp’ simply alludes to the standard allotment of cloth for a monk’s robe. Thus, he continues, ‘…when asked the meaning of ‘Buddha’, Zhaozhou responded, more or less, “A set of monk’s robes is all it takes”’ (2003: 76).

Dongshan’s response “Three pounds of hemp” is what a Zen adept calls ‘the characteristic decoy, the bait for the reasoning mind, the trap in the koan’.[43] It is a direct expression of fact in answer to the monk’s question. McRae here took only account of the descriptive aspect, without seeing into the performative essence of Dongshan’s answer. As Robert Aitken points out, ‘the fact and its rich presentation are one in …Tung-shan’ (1990: 124).

A fitting response to a koan needs to express the ambiguity of its descriptive and performative nature, which mirrors the immediacy of both the conditioned and the unconditioned nature of reality.

Mysteriously enough, students come up with remarkably similar presentations for a particular koan—though far removed in time and culture from the masters who created it. In other words, there is a shared understanding about the resolution of koans. And this understanding bridges eras, cultures, and languages. There are some koans where a resolution might be presented in words, whereas the intimate understanding of others might be demonstrated in action. As Hori points out, ‘“experience” is not a matter of mere consciousness, but is embodied activity’ (2003: 295). The performance of a koan is embodied insight.

However, there is not always accord in how teachers see a particular koan and what kind of response they expect. Variations can happen even within a single lineage. This is in part due to the fact that most koans have more than one point that can be presented, and that teachers may emphasise different points of the same koan.

The resolution of each koan is held in confidence so as not to disturb the practice of others. In the *Rinzai* tradition, where the answers to koans have become standardised, a student might try to cheat their way through koans. However, if a student were to hear of a response to a koan at second hand and try to present it, they would come a cropper. An experienced teacher would instantly recognise the counterfeit nature of such a response and would unmask the student’s ignorance with the use of checking questions.

[43] IG, 10 February 2007.

4.5. The process of koan study

Koan study developed differently in the two great Chan traditions that became Rinzai and Sōtō in Japan. Rinzai teachers tended to systematise koan study, whereas Sōtō teachers would handpick koans for individual students.[44] In the Rinzai School koan study continues to be a central part of practice, both in Japan and in the West. In the Sōtō School koan study eventually fell into neglect. In the early twentieth century, a Sōtō monk called Harada Sōgaku (1871–1961) lamented this decline. He resolved to undertake koan study with Rinzai master Dokutan Sōsan. Returning to the Sōtō fold, he then re-established rigorous koan training. His successor Yasutani Hakuun (1885–1973) later severed his formal ties to the Sōtō school and established an independent Zen organization called the *Sanbōkyōdan*, or 'Three Treasures Association'. Like his teacher Harada, Yasutani saw himself as integrating the best of the Rinzai and Sōtō tradition (Sharf, 1995: 420).

Though the *Sanbōkyōdan* is regarded in Japan as a minor sect, it had significant influence in the West. Quite a few lineages have emerged from the Harada/Yasutani line. Prominent amongst them are the present-day *Sanbōkyōdan*, the White Plum Asanga (founded by Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi), the Rochester Zen Center founded by Phillip Kapleau, and the Diamond Sangha founded by Robert Aitken. These lineages offer koan study as part of their overall training.

Koan study in the Harada/Yasutani lineages is embedded in a matrix of other practices, such as bowing, sutra recitation, precept study, character work, and *samu.* Its structure is mostly as follows: after students complete the opening koan, they then take up the 'Miscellaneous Koans',[45] the 'Gateless Barrier', the 'Blue Cliff Record', the 'Book of Serenity', and the 'Transmission of the Light'. Finally, as completion of koan study, students work their way through Dongshan's 'Five Ranks' and the Bodhisattva Precepts which are taken up at this point not as ethical guidelines but as koans.

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[44] Aitken, R., 1990, *The Gateless Gate,* San Francisco, North Point Press, p. xiv.

[45] The collection called 'Miscellaneous Koans' in the Diamond Sangha originated partly from a list of checking questions for *Mu* as used in the Rinzai tradition (Hori, 2000: 290-291).

4.6. The initial koan

Teachers most often choose the koan *Mu* as the initial koan, but some use ‘What is the sound of one hand?’, ‘Who is hearing?’, or ‘What is your original face before your parents were born?’.

The koan *Mu* is especially potent. Phillip Kapleau explains this as follows:

> What is the source of Mu’s power, what has enabled it to hold first rank among koans for over a thousand years? Whereas such koans as “What is the sound of one hand?” and “What is your Face before your parents’ birth” bait the discursive mind and excite the imagination, Mu holds itself coldly aloof from both the intellect and the imagination. Try as it might, reasoning cannot even gain a toehold. (1980: 69)

Mu is the first case in the *Wumenkuan* :

> A monk asked Zhaozhou, “Has the dog Buddha nature or not?”
> Zhaozhou said: “*Mu.*”

The monk’s question, “Has the dog Buddha nature or not?” can be interpreted as “Do all beings have Buddha nature?”. Zhaozhou’s response “*Mu”* means ‘is not’. However, the literal meaning of the master’s response is not germane to the work with the koan. A student sitting with *Mu* will usually work with it in two ways. One way is to repeat *Mu* on the out-breath—which has the effect of deepening *Samādhi.* Another way is to ask the question, “What is *Mu?”*—which heightens the sense of spiritual urgency.

Although the koan *Mu* has a proven track record of bringing Zen students to awakening, it does not work for all students. In the following account, a long-time practitioner highlights his difficulties with *Mu.*

> My experience with *Mu* was that it cut across my early discovery of a deep peace and sense of presence in meditation, and I bitterly resented its meaninglessness as a question… In being set to work on *Mu* by my teachers there was a sense of having the real point and purpose of what I was doing withheld by a hierarchy of “cognoscenti” who weren’t at all troubled that what they were asking me to do was nonsensical. Their refusal to explain was hard to bear. [46]

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[46] IG, 15 February, 2007.

If a student has ongoing difficulties with the first koan, the teacher will sometimes change to a different koan, such as ‘Who is hearing?’ or ‘What is the sound of one hand?’, and return to *Mu* at a later stage. In contrast to the struggle with *Mu*, the foregoing student found that the koans ‘Who is hearing?’ and ‘What is the sound of one hand?’ more accessible:

> [They] opened up the most wonderful sense of vastness and connectedness for me, on the one hand through sound and on the other through silence—a falling away of the sense of separation, on the one side, through sounds, and on the other a sense of everything being present at once in silence.

The road to resolution of the first koan is mostly long and wearisome; it can take anything from months to decades. There are also many students who practice with koans and do not have a realisation experience, despite long years of practice. A student struggling with the koan *Mu* writes the following:

> Not knowing and uncertainty seem to be what we struggle against in this world of insecurity. Koan study makes this explicit by inviting us in to the heart of unknowing. This can be challenging, frustrating and painful – as it raises questions about our value and efficacy as human beings. It is like being lost with nothing to hold on to and none of the usual props to lean on.[47]

Even though a student may feel at a loss and it may take a long time to resolve the first koan, the practice of koan introspection is itself transformative. A mature student looks back at her experience of working with *Mu*:

> Working with my first koan was like nothing I had ever done before. It was full of expectation and promise of enlightenment. From early on it changed the way I experienced the world around me. I began to hear birds, be more aware of other beings around me. I also became more aware of myself. It was a real step into the unknown—very scary at times with a real sense of being at the edge of the precipice.[48]

Fear is a natural response to the unknown. Tarrant explains the reason for this fear as follows:

> There is nowhere to stand. There is no longer an orientation, as orientation depends on the location of the self and of other things with reference to that location. That is why some people feel scared. (Tarrant, 1987: 117)

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[47] IG, 14 December 2006.
[48] IG, 10 December 2006.

Tarrant makes an important point: orientation relates to a sense of self. Once that becomes diffuse or even disappears, there are no markers to aid orientation, and human beings recoil.

4.7. Readiness

In the process of sitting with a first koan a readiness gathers. As Tarrant explains, 'the meaning of readiness…is that the student has more presence, more of a container for the insight, more context' (1989: 117). He elaborates as follows:

> Presence itself comes from a patient fidelity to the whole of experience including incomprehension and pain. Degree of presence is the reason for the different emotional reactions to kensho. If there has been a steady gathering of presence there is ease and joy. But the student who breaks through out of sheer desperation, without readiness, may have a rough time. (Tarrant, 1987: 131)

When we take into account that 'readiness' is part of the process, we can see that the old debate about whether realisation is sudden or gradual misses the point. Here is an interesting take on this:

> The suddenness of Zen experience refers not only to a subjective abruptness but also to the way in which the real appears entire. Presence is the slow part of the inner transformation, the preparation for that appearance. (Tarrant, 1987: 129-130)

When the student has ripened, and is close to realisation, he or she can experience a sense of disorientation. This can be a precursor to realisation. A student expresses this liminal state as follows:

> In the first or second sesshin I was totally disoriented; it was like I didn't know where I was in the world and it made no difference. (Tarrant, 1987: 92)

A gathering sense of disorientation is also evident in the following account:

> During the sesshin at which I had a realisation experience, I was the *jikijitsu* [time-keeper]. A few days into the sesshin I got quite disoriented. Although I knew the role well, I started to lose track of what was supposed to happen next. Time lost its meaning and I made more and more mistakes in the *zendo*. In the end I went to my teacher and burst into tears, "Just let me sit!" I cried. The next days passed as if in a daze. Finally, one morning, I went to the toilet

> and experienced the sound of flushing water for the very first time. I couldn't stop laughing and crying![49]

We can see in this description how the experience of realisation was foreshadowed in the gathering disorientation. It is as if the sense of self begins to loosen before it finally drops away in the moment of awakening.

4.8. The experience of realisation

With realisation, people often experience the simplest sights and sounds as extraordinary. One student came to her teacher and said in wonder, 'Oh—the floor meets the walls exactly!' The ordinariness of the world comes to light in a completely new way. An old-time student describes this experience of freshness and wonder as follows:

> Realisation made me experience life as for the first time, like a baby learning about life. I remember being amazed at simple things—I couldn't get over the fact that the sun sets in the evening and rises in the morning, or that if I turned left to start *kinhin* [the circular meditation walk in *sesshin*] I would come back to my place again. Everything was full of wonder![50]

This example shows that a realisation experience is out of the ordinary. Afterwards, even the most common object or pattern seems odd and wonderful.

With realisation can come a sense that each moment is full and complete. Zen Master Yamada expressed this as follows: 'I felt everything was perfect just as it was, even the sorrow' (Tarrant, 1987: 85). However, each experience is unique. There is no such thing as a 'standard' realisation experience. For some students the experience may be low-key and even disappointing, especially if there is little readiness.

Certain signs indicate that a student may have had a realisation experience, and may prompt a teacher to probe the extent of the experience. One of the signs is an unshakable confidence. This confidence arises when what was formerly an external teaching is now a personal and present experience. Often laughter and tears intermingle and the student is full of joy and gratitude. Such signs are not only pertinent today; they are clearly discernible in ancient descriptions. Here is a description of Wuye's enlightenment experience that was triggered by an encounter with Mazu:[51]

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[49] IG, 30 November 2006

[50] IG, 4 December 2006.

[51] Jia counts this story as only one of four dialogues in the *Mazu yulu* which is likely to be authentic. (2006: 60)

> Upon hearing these words, Wuye was awakened suddenly. He wept and told Daji, “Formerly I thought the Buddhist Way is far away, and I had to make efforts for many kalpas to realize it. Today for the first time I know that the true form of dharma-body is originally complete within oneself.”
>
> (Poceski, 2004: 68)

Wuye’s new-found confidence, his tears of gratitude, and his new sense of embodying the teachings are all signs of a realisation experience. In fact, the idea of what an enlightenment experience might be has remained remarkably stable through the ages, connecting present day Zen with its Chinese ancestors.

After a student has had an awakening experience and can readily present a koan, the teacher will usually ask the student a series of checking questions to further open and deepen insight.

4.9. Checking questions

‘Checking questions’ are used in koan study to plumb the depths of a student’s insight into a particular koan. They are sometimes referred to as ‘peripheral cases’, as opposed to ‘main cases’ as they are koans in their own right (Mohr, 2000: 246). In the Diamond Sangha a group of checking questions follows each of the koans *Mu* and ‘What is the sound of one hand?’ A student can only be said to have completed either koan when all the checking questions have been resolved. Depending on the strength of the initial experience, this checking process may take months or even years. But not only opening koans have checking questions. A teacher will often use impromptu checking questions to test a student’s insight into a particular koan.

Working with checking questions can be a positive experience for a student. Zen Master John Tarrant reminisces:

> The teacher had a nice set of questions to test if you were really having some sort of profound experience…The questions pushed me to see that a spiritual experience takes place in the life I actually live. (2004: 41)

However, use of checking questions can also be negative, if offered too early after realisation. An old-timer comments:

> I now wonder if there would be value in letting a person sit with the mystery of their discovery before applying the testing questions, which in my case at

> least were not in themselves a deepening of the experience but a surfacing from it once more into the realm of mental sorting and classifying.[52]

One can see by this response that the teacher's role is delicate. He or she has to have a clear intuitive grasp on when to hold back and when to push forward.

4.10. Changes after realisation

A student noticed the following changes after their realisation experience:

> Koan study has turned my view of the world upside down. Where I used to try and control everything, now (at times) I can let things be and work on them on another level. I find joy in the mundane. Every day, I feel the wind, hear the birds and see trees that I never ever saw before. Colleagues tell me I bring a calmness and spaciousness to the office, so that even in times of real pressure, they feel a sense of calmness and security.[53]

Realisation also brings with it a deep sense of interconnectedness. In the following account, a student calls this 'kinship'.

> When I realized that I was seeing the world as it is, that led to a feeling of kinship. Whatever I paid attention to, that seemed to be me at that moment. I'd already been everything, done everything, owned everything. I'd already been this wall and this couch. All you have to do is be you and everything comes to you. (Tarrant, 2004: 139)

In this example we can observe a feeling of kinship so deep as to be identity. It is the personal experience of Conditioned Arising *(pratītya samutpāda).*

4.11. Completing koan study

To the outsider, koan study may look like a step-by-step programme ending with a kind of graduation, but this is far from true. Hakuin said, 'The farther you enter the sea the deeper it gets and the higher you climb a mountain the taller it gets' (Yampolski, 1971: 122). This principle applies not only to the whole journey of koan study, but to each koan. For each koan can be deepened endlessly. That is why the work with koans is never truly complete.

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[52] IG, 13 November 2006.
[53] IG, 13 December 2006.

5. Conclusion

There is a vast divide between the folklore of Zen and its history. Yet both have their place. As McRae says,

> Legend reflects the school's total creative output and is an important guide to its self-image, whereas history is the modern understanding of the dynamic cultural and intellectual realities of the school's development. (1986: 10)

The folklore of Zen is its treasure, and its legends are powerful communal expressions of Buddhist teachings. However, when the boundary between legend and history is blurred, integrity is breached. The master narrative not only smudges such boundaries, but also stifles the critical thinking that would enable Zen practitioners to deconstruct it. Thus an ongoing dialogue between practitioners and scholars is of great importance.

For Zen practitioners to embrace critical thinking means not only to investigate the history of the tradition, it also means to engage with scholars who are critical of Zen practice. In particular, Sharf's doubt about whether the contemporary focus on personal experience reflects the tradition of Zen would be important to address fully. The scope of this study does not permit more than a cursory investigation of this question. At first glance, comments by Wumen and Dahui quoted in this study point to their understanding of realisation as an immediate and embodied experience. As well, observations by contemporary koan students indicate that koans can act as catalysts for realisation experiences. The implication of this is that Sharf's assumptions may be flawed.

Is koan study still seen to have value? A contemporary student says:

> I would say that working with a koan is invaluable. That is, one cannot assign any value to it. To do that, a koan would have to be separate from oneself. But that is not how it is. Each koan is the totality. One could say that that is the value, that koans reveal themselves to be the totality and that totality is no other than myself.[54]

Each koan is a 'tiny door that opens to great vistas' (Aitken, 1996: 103). The enduring allure of koans is their oddness, their challenge to the discursive mind, and their mysterious potential. Even when their history is deconstructed and found to differ profoundly from the master narrative, it makes no difference to the practice of koan study. When used as a focus of meditation, it is immaterial whether a koan story is based upon fact or fiction.

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[54] IG, 15 November 2006.

However, koans are not only used as a focus in meditation, they often form the basis of contemporary teachers' Dharma talks and articles. If teachers at such times do not clarify the difference between Zen's history and its legends, practitioners fail to develop an intelligent appraisal of the history of their tradition and therefore lack an understanding of how contemporary Western Zen has been shaped by the past. Only a critical evaluation of the master narrative will enable Western Zen to finally develop its own authentic practice.

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